

**Facing the Holidays with a Heavy Heart:
Five Ways to Show You Care During a Darker Christmas Season**

*The holidays are meant to be filled with light, laughter, and good cheer.
But when a friend or loved one is seriously or terminally ill, those things might
seem to be in short supply. Here's how you can
prepare to face this season with purpose and compassion.*

By Joni Aldrich

Take a look at any storefront window or television special: the holidays are meant to be a joyous occasion filled with frivolity and good cheer. It's a time to believe in miracles, to return to our core beliefs and values, and to spend quality time with family and friends—all while eating plenty of sweets with no heed to calories! But what happens if there is no “merry” in Christmas? How do you face “the most wonderful time of the year” when someone you love is either seriously or terminally ill? It's a question that many of us are facing as we watch our neighbors' tree lights twinkle and listen to happy holiday tunes playing on the radio. The fact is, you might not feel like participating in these holiday rituals yourself when seasonal celebration collides with personal trauma.

When the harshness of reality assaults your everyday existence, there are bigger concerns than how to decorate your tree or which wrapping paper to buy. The thing is—unless you move to a cave!—the holiday season *will* impact your life, whether you want it to or not. But if you step back and think about the true reasons for the season—mercy, caring, and humanity—the holidays that seem so difficult can also hold invaluable gifts.

I speak from experience. In 2006, my husband Gordon lost his two-year battle with cancer. My book, *The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer* (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392550-3-2, \$19.95), tells the story of my family's experiences while simultaneously offering valuable step-by-step advice that will give readers the tools they need to have a fighting chance against cancer. The memories of the last Christmas my husband and I spent together are both precious and painful.

I'll be honest: some of those gifts that come from the holiday season will be painful, but they can also develop into lasting memories of love and faith. Through my own bittersweet experiences, I learned a valuable lesson: that the joy of Christmas truly is

what you make it within your heart and soul. No, it won't always be easy. It's unrealistic to believe that every holiday season will be enjoyed without pain. Yet, time and space will allow these difficult remembrances to be tempered with a silver lining.

As this special season approaches, you or someone you know may be going through a dark holiday. If you lend your support to help your loved one through these difficult times—even though it may be hard—you will give and receive special blessings to cherish. Read on for guidelines that you may find helpful when visiting an ill patient during the holidays:

Don't wait for the “right time”—just go. The fact is, there will *never* be a “convenient” time to visit a family member or friend who is battling a serious illness. Even good days are filled with difficulties and discomfort. Furthermore, *you* might not feel the same level of ease that you once did. Ultimately, though, you will both be thankful that you spent time together.

Visiting an ill loved one is going to be hard. Know that, and choose to move forward anyway. When you do visit, consider the needs of the patient and his or her family. Call in advance, and take your cues from the family regarding the duration of your visit. Consider the well-being of the patient, and err on the side of caution when choosing to visit. If you are under the weather yourself—even if it's just a sniffle or a cough—consider a phone conversation instead, or wear a mask. Also, avoid wearing strong perfumes or colognes.

Visit the patient *and* the caregivers. Remember, your loved one is not the only one whose daily life has been affected by his or her illness. The routines and priorities of family and/or caregivers have changed drastically as well. Follow their leads when interacting with the patient, and make sure to focus your attention on them as well.

Whatever you do, don't avoid the family because you are uncertain of how to approach them in a difficult situation. Call often, bring food, and offer prayers. These “gifts” will be appreciated by the patient and by his or her family. It is very painful when the family expects that support, and ultimately doesn't receive it.

Avoid preconceived expectations. Imagine this: you've scheduled a visit with an ill friend, and you have grand plans for watching a favorite holiday movie and chuckling over the characters' foibles. After all, it will do your friend good to think about something else, right? Perhaps so, but it turns out that your friend more urgently wants to talk about her memories, fears, and uncertainties. You're thrown completely for a loop and don't know how to respond.

Always gauge the patient's mood as acutely as you can. It's helpful if she is forthcoming about what would give her the most comfort, but she may not be able to express her

feelings and needs that easily. Make the visit about the patient, whether that means that you end up laughing, crying, reminiscing, or even leaving until a more convenient time.

Be sensitive to changes in the holiday routine. Chances are, you're feeling less festive than in years past—and the same goes for the patient and his family. Remember that not only their enthusiasm but also their finances are likely to be impacted. Be prepared for the possibility that you might not receive a Christmas card or gift this year, and check with the family beforehand regarding gift exchanges and get-togethers.

If a holiday party does take place, take extra care not to go off into a corner to whisper with other friends and acquaintances. The last thing your ill loved one needs or wants is to feel like he is the cause of speculation or sadness. Similarly, there *will* be tears, so let them come. Sometimes the patient won't want to see them, so you may have to steal some private time. Whatever you do, don't shut yourself off completely from the patient or from your feelings.

Remember that the best gifts can't be wrapped. It's trite but true—the most valuable things in life aren't things. Your care and support will mean more to an ill friend and her family than any amount of material presents. And when it does come time to break out the wrapping paper and bows, think about what might be truly *needed*. Blankets, shawls, a baby monitor, a sensible gift basket, or a heating pad and warm socks will be greatly appreciated, perhaps more so than traditional holiday trinkets. Keep in mind that flowers, including poinsettias, should be avoided due to their smell and the care that they require.

Don't forget that a hug is one of the most powerful gifts that can be exchanged. A kind word is another. A sympathetic ear is often the best present you can offer, along with a strong shoulder to cry on. Make sure that your ill loved one and his or her family know that you are available to help at any time, whether that means a grocery store run, an extra pair of hands to help hang holiday decorations, a night out for the patient's family, or going to get a prescription filled. Prayer is the most blessed gift of all—pray together, pray separately, and pray often.

Ultimately, you will be blessed because of the comfort and love you have given to a family who needs it. You will have experienced the true meaning of Christmas—giving a gift to others that is much more valuable than anything you could ever wrap in a box.

This holiday season, the precious time you spend with your ill loved one will offer hope and comfort, and it will supply precious memories that you will cherish for the rest of your life.

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About the Author:

Joni James Aldrich believes that she has been preparing to write *The Saving of Gordon* for most of her life. As a child, she was a better than average student. She wrote dramatic poetry. Before college, she worked at a newspaper. In her professional career, she has worked in analysis, documentation, communications, and public speaking. She has also been able to incorporate her love of photography into the design of the books. However, her real motivation for writing this book was two years of crisis in the cancer school of hard knocks. She feels it is her destiny to relay this story to readers in a way that will help them in their own cancer journeys. It is her hope that someday that journey will no longer be necessary for anyone.

Joni is also the author of *The Cancer Patient W-I-N Book: Our Cancer Fight Journal* and of the upcoming book *The Losing of Gordon: A Beacon Through the Storm Called "Grief."*

For more information, please visit www.thecancerlifeline.com.

About the Book:

The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392550-3-2, \$19.95) is available at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.